

# The Erosion of Italian Regionalism

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Elections in the small, peaceful, politically stable region of Umbria in central Italy normally go rather unnoticed. Since its establishment in 1970, the region, which now counts some 880.000 inhabitants, has always had a clear leftist majority. So far, it has been governed uninterruptedly first by the communist party and, since the 1990s, by its successors. Together with Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, Umbria has been one of the historical strongholds of the Italian left, a model in terms of good administration, social cohesion and quality of life. When it was excluded from the national government, the left used the success story in Umbria and other regions as a showcase of its political ability and reliability.

The attention given to the regional elections in Umbria didn't change when the direct election of regional presidents was introduced in 1995 (and constitutionalized in 1999), making Italy the only European country with a presidential system at regional level. For the past two decades, the only electoral thrill in the region was the amount of votes and the broader or smaller margin in favour of the presidential candidate from the leftist coalition.

All of a sudden at the end of this summer, the usually low-key election of this fortunate region with a rather unspectacular political system brought Umbria into the spotlight of national politics. In Rome, the coalition between Matteo Salvini's right wing *Lega* and the populist *Five Stars Movement* had collapsed, due to the former's desire to capitalize its growing popular support especially on an [anti-immigration agenda](#). To avoid snap elections that would most likely have made the *Lega* the first party in Parliament, a new political coalition was formed, under the same Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. Now the junior partner of the *Five Stars Movement* is the moderate leftist *Partito Democratico*, from which its former leader and former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi split to form his own party, *Italia Viva*, – a move that allows Mr Renzi to support the government but to control its life: should he leave the coalition, it would no longer have a majority in Parliament.

Umbria was the first region to hold elections after the formation of the new cabinet in Rome and therefore became an important political test, both for the new coalition and for the new opposition. With an unprecedented move, the new coalition partners in Rome (which had fought like cat and dog for the past decade) decided to run together with a joint candidate. If successful, this move would have boosted the new national majority. Umbria was considered as a safe playground by the left: in the last regional elections held in 2015, the two parties together collected over 56% of the votes. On the right-wing camp, regional elections provided the opportunity to take revenge and to prove that the new coalition in Rome might hold the majority in Parliament, but does not enjoy support by the majority of citizens. Umbria thus became a national political test.

On 27 October, the regional election in Umbria marked a landslide victory for the right coalition, led by the *Lega*. Donatella Tesei, the *Lega* candidate, also supported by the far-right *Fratelli d'Italia* and by the more moderate *Forza Italia*, was elected president with 57,55% of the votes. The defeat of the joint candidate supported by the *Five Stars Movement* and the *Partito Democratico* had been expected, although certainly not in this magnitude (only 37,48%). The electoral debacle was due primarily to the poor performance of the *Five Stars Movement*, which collected as little as 7,41% (in the national elections in March 2018 it had gained 32,7%). The more structured *Partito Democratico* received 22,3%, in line with its current national performance, but much less compared to the 33,5% from the previous regional elections of 2015. The shrink is due to some local scandals involving the outgoing regional government and to the strategy by Mr Renzi, who did not campaign in Umbria and invited his followers to abstain. This was enough to cause a serious damage to his former party, the *Partito Democratico*, but not to prevent an actually broader voter turnout, which was 9% higher than in the previous regional election four years ago.

Even clearer are the electoral trends in the right-wing camp. The *Lega* reached a historical 36,9%, a spectacular result considering that until recently it was a territorial party of the North of Italy and had traditionally no support south of Bologna. In just a few years, Matteo Salvini managed to transform it into a national party, campaigning primarily against immigration. Despite the fact that in Umbria foreigners in total amount to 10,8% of the regional population, the relevance of immigration for the political agenda is illustrated by the performance of the second party in the regional coalition, the even more radical *Fratelli d'Italia*, which scored a surprising 10,4% having a very similar but even more nationalistic agenda (law and order, no immigration, 'Italy first'). Mr Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*, once the mastermind and the biggest party of the (then) centre-right camp, got a humble 5,5%, continuing its decline. The fact that Mr Salvini's party was ousted from the national government had the effect to re-create the centre-right coalition, which had been split when the *Lega* had formed a coalition in Rome with the *Five Stars Movement* in 2018. However, little has remained of the old centre-right coalition: the centrist element, *Forza Italia*, has almost disappeared, and the lead is now strongly in the hands of Mr Salvini's *Lega*, with support of the far-right *Fratelli d'Italia*. The agenda is now right-far right.

Immediately after the electoral fiasco, the governing parties in Rome made clear that regional elections won't have an impact on the national government, but also that they won't run together anymore. In the first half of 2020, eight regional elections will take place: should the trend be confirmed, and should the *Lega* win all elections, it is unlikely that there won't be repercussions at the national level. At present, 12 regions are governed by the centre-right and seven by the centre-left, whereas no region is held by the *Five Stars Movement*. It is not unlikely that in eight months from now all regions will be in the hands of the centre-right or even of the right-wing only. The only two small exceptions will be the tiny and very special South Tyrol and Aosta Valley, governed by autonomist coalitions and not by chance the only two regions with no direct election of the president and with a proportional electoral system. The next fundamental test will be the regional elections in Emilia-Romagna in January:

like Umbria, the region has always been controlled by the left, but it is far bigger and politically more significant.

## What's the constitutional take of all this?

Twenty years down the road of the constitutional reform that established the popular election of the regional presidents, the performance of the presidential system has not been extraordinary. No doubt, it brought stability in the political systems of the regions. But on the other hand, the high price has been the shrinking, even vanishing role of political parties as mediators. A trend which affects national politics as well, but which is extreme at regional level, where there is hardly any trace left of a territorial political system, except in a few, peripheral regions.

As a consequence, parties are identified with their leaders rather than with a political platform, let alone with a regional one. As it is more and more common in all regions, the campaign in Umbria focused on national issues. The posters portrayed the national leaders: Mr Salvini was on each and every *Lega* poster, with or without the regional candidate. Other parties did the same, just in a less iconic way. A centralistic, leader-obsessed party system is harmful to regional autonomy and perhaps to democracy as a whole.

Furthermore, and consequently, the institutional and political creativity at regional level is being reduced. Regions less and less make use of their (on paper not small) margin of autonomy in determining own political strategies in the significant areas falling into their scope. When ordinary regions adopted their new statutes of autonomy, between 2002 and 2012, they did so in a rather conformist way. Regional legislation is often copy-pasted in several regions and is very often challenged by the national government on political rather than on technical grounds. Presently even the special region of Aosta Valley is considering giving up the parliamentary system and moving to a presidential one. Examples of fading autonomy are countless.

Despite the dire state of Italian regionalism, regions remain political laboratories and some elections mark a trend. On the same day of the election in Umbria, the German Land of Thuringia held elections that for the first time made a coalition without the *Linke* or the *Alternative für Deutschland* impossible, opening up unexplored political ways even in the much less volatile German political system. For good or bad, subnational entities remain essential. Even when neither politicians nor the electorate seem aware of that.

